

# FORTUNE

## What Americans should expect when traveling to Cuba

By Christopher Elliott

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**Last year, 700,000 Americans visited Cuba. Now, Cuba is bracing for up to 10 million visitors. Is the country ready?**

When Secretary of State John Kerry raises the American flag at the U.S. embassy in Havana on Friday, he'll be underscoring what the rest of the world already knows: Cuba is hot.

How hot? *Caliente* hot.

Consider:

- The island ranks 14th on the list of the most popular Caribbean destinations, a five-place jump from last December, according to research by Sojern.
- The number of Americans interested in travel to Cuba if all U.S. Government restrictions were lifted is on the rise, with 15% saying they'd go as soon as they could, compared with 11% last year, according to a survey by Travel Leaders Group.
- Cuba is bracing for as many as 10 million American tourists per year, the International Monetary Fund estimates. Last year, it received 700,000 U.S. tourists.

### **Getting there**

But Cuban tourism still has a long way to go. First, there's the whole issue of getting *into* Cuba legally. The U.S. embassy in Havana publishes a handy list of restrictions.

"There's a lot more interest circulating for tours to Cuba, but it may take some time for individual travel to pick up because you still have to go for educational purposes or to help the Cuban people," Rebecca Heidgerd, the director of marketing at StudentUniverse, told me. If, for instance, you say you are going on an educational trip, you need to have an itinerary that backs it up.

Independent travel is tough. While airlines and cruise lines have recently announced new service to Cuba, you still need to prove that you're going for a reason that falls under 12 categories; if you say, for instance, you're going for educational reasons, you need to have an itinerary that backs it up. Carnival will start running "culturally-themed" cruises to Havana next May. Several airlines, including American, Delta and JetBlue, already offer charter flights to Cuba, but have signaled their interest in running scheduled service to the island.

### **Is Cuba prepared?**

Getting there is only part of the problem. Simply put, Cuba isn't ready for an onslaught of American tourists.

"The challenges on the ground are many, but it all boils down to one simple word: infrastructure," says Arthur Berman, vice president of the Latin America & Cuba division for Central Holidays. "But that one word will unfortunately take quite a long while to implement."

**Crumbling hotels and transportation infrastructure.** The pictures of Old Havana, with its charming colonial architecture, are deceiving. Cuba's hotels desperately need an upgrade, say experts. "Cuba does not have many high quality hotels, and they do not have enough good taxis and buses to supply the demand," says April Springer, International Expeditions' destination manager for Cuba.

**No way to communicate.** Cell phone coverage in Cuba is spotty and good luck trying to get connected to the Internet. “That’s the biggest challenge I had in Cuba — the limited access to the Internet,” says Camilo Ferro, who works for a packaging company in Chicago, and recently visited Cuba. How bad was it? He could only find a single Wi-Fi hotspot on his trip. At the hotel, “they were using a bootlegged Windows version and the cost was \$6.50 per hour,” he recalls.

**Cultural miscues.** Perhaps the biggest challenge, at least where tourism is concerned, is the cultural divide between the U.S. and Cuba. Edward Piegza, founder of Classic Journeys, says he’s personally seen a popular tourist attraction, Hemingway’s House, suddenly close without explanation. He’s witnessed a canceled hotel booking because it was “taken over for a government meeting.” And he’s seen morning charter flights moved to the afternoon at the last minute. “It’s not as easy to roll with the punches in Cuba, unless you’re with somebody who has some serious connections,” he says. Bringing the country up to U.S. standards — or lowering our expectations when we visit — could take time.

### **Will that stop Americans from visiting?**

Hardly. “There is a good deal of pent-up demand on the part of the American public to visit Cuba,” says John Boyd, who runs a location consultancy in Princeton, N.J. He predicts Americans will flood into Cuba once the socialist government goes belly-up. The first wave may not be tourists, but land speculators. It’s a land rush, says Boyd, that will “dwarf all others that we have seen in the Caribbean,” he says. “We are instructing our clients to factor in huge inflationary increases in land costs over the next several years as capitalism takes hold in Cuba.” So, while Cuba may be hot, experts say Americans may have to feel the heat from afar — at least, for now.